



NATIVE ART NOW!

**Developments in Contemporary
Native American Art Since 1992**

Edited by Veronica Passalacqua and Kate Morris
Compiled by James H. Nottage

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Front cover:

Meryl McMaster (Plains Cree/Blackfoot)
Anima ("In-Between Worlds" series, detail), 2012
Digital chromogenic print; image: 36 x 36 inches
Collection of the Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art
Courtesy of the artist

Frontispiece: Plate 1

Nicholas Galanin (Tlingit/Aleut, born 1979)
I Think It Goes Like This?, 2012
Appropriated Indonesian totem pole, deconstructed, wood, paint; exhibition area: 100 square feet
Collection of the Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art



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CHAPTER 14

EVERYTHING COMES AROUND: Native Media

Ryan Rice (Kanien'kehá:ka)

To international acclaim, Inuk filmmaker and media activist Zacharias Kunuk was awarded the 2001 Camera D'or at the Cannes Film Festival for his epic first feature-length film *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner*. The film brought attention to the creative forces Kunuk developed through the independent Inuit production company Igloodik Isuma Productions. In 2002, Kunuk's earlier work, the thirteen-part series *Nunavut (Our Land)*, 1995, was curated into *documenta 11* in Kassel, Germany, one of the world's most prestigious exhibitions of contemporary art. To present it as a video installation, thirteen video monitors were suspended across a darkened passageway and simultaneously looped each half hour episode from the series. *Documenta 11*'s primarily European and Western audiences were moved beyond the periphery of their mutual world by this encounter with Kunuk's accrued vision of Inuit traditional life not too long ago.

Okwui Enwezor, *documenta 11*'s artistic director, strategically presented works such as *Nunavut (Our Land)* to collapse the dominant perspective on global issues and provide a platform inclusive of a transcultural exchange between distinct and diverse cultural experiences beyond the mainstream. For Kunuk, global prominence was not the intention; rather, it was the opportunity to maintain Inuit tradition. He says: "We are Inuit storytellers in a 4,000-year-old oral tradition. In our time we have new technologies, so it's our job to adapt digital filmmaking to continue our elders' tradition

of passing on information to future Inuit from one generation to the next. It's a bonus when the rest of the world sees our work and appreciates our Inuit point of view."¹

Media-based technologies have granted Kunuk and the Igloolik Isuma Collective the opportunity to reinforce and bring prior traditional knowledge to current and future generations to heed, as well as to expand, a discourse of representation and autonomy. Inuk curator and art historian Heather Igloliorte explains,

Isuma [Collective] holds itself accountable to a strict code of Inuit aesthetics, by foregrounding the oral tradition and the use of Inuktitut within the film's production. The presence of the oral tradition in the arts is exceedingly important to the maintenance of an Inuit aesthetic, because the oral tradition and the continuance of our oral history is central to our definition of Inuit culture. It is how we have transmitted Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit across generational and geographical divides. Any critical theorization of Inuit visual culture must take into account the mutually constitutive relationship between language, artworks and objects of material culture in the form of stories, songs, and performances that give meaning to aesthetic forms.²

By seizing innovative means as an active tool to recover from the impact of transitional changes, the shift to articulate the concepts of Indigeniety in a passing matter of time has become increasingly universal. Okwui Enwezor observes the influence of media as a vehicle of expression:

This movement between modern image technology and the narrativity of tradition is very important in certain cultures...[it] has opened up a space through which we can look at images—not simply from the Hollywood perspective of how cinema performs in a social context, but how these instruments have been used. I can give you examples where the production of the image has become completely necessary for how societies see themselves surviving. Take the Igloolik/Isuma Collective, a group of Inuit filmmakers based in Canada, for example. They use video as an instrument of storytelling in an attempt to transmit emergent notions of survival, continuity, and community that links the Inuits [sic] to their historical past...they are now deploying technologies of reproduction to speak on questions of tradition and processes of narrating tradition.³



Plate 192
Shelley Niro (Bay of Quinte Mohawk, b. 1954)
The Shirt, 2003
DVD; 5:55 minutes

Collection of the National Gallery of Canada (No. 41982)
Image Courtesy of the artist

The continuity component supports a multitude of Indigenous artists' intentions to dynamically engage, document, and disseminate the philosophical principles and certainty of traditional knowledge systems to their communities and audiences. By building on what was left to us to interpret and pass on, new media-based art practices have become a substantial language capable of restoring Indigenous aesthetics and wisdom in the present as well as the future. The tangible, conceptual, and performative visual elements embedded in art have been shifted to endure notions of the real in time and space.

Since the 1960s, film and video productions have emerged and broadened the lens-based art form and established a place in museum and gallery exhibitions. As the two media evolved, the equipment, accessories, and production skills required became more accessible. Many Indigenous communities were introduced to video as a critical tool for documenting language and cultural events to preserve and enrich cultural and educational activities. Video documentation also became an important activist tool that has aided numerous Indigenous peoples' causes worldwide. From the clear-cutting destruction of the rainforest in the Amazon to capturing political stand-offs across the Americas, media provided evidence, warnings, and effects of resistance, transition, and tradition to a wider audience.

The tactfulness of media has become a

critical tool for artistic expression beyond the conventional genres. Video is alluring because it is very user-friendly, and artists have reaped its potential. Like photography, it is an exciting and pragmatic tool that attracts many artists; it can be high- or low-tech and is vibrant and current. It is particularly appealing to Indigenous artists because it facilitates the creation of an autonomous narrative that expands upon the expressive influence of orality that is capable of collapsing time or extending/expanding it. Because global culture is so inundated by moving images—on TV, at the movies, and on the Internet via platforms such as YouTube—video and film have become an open medium that has a heightened ability to affect us directly and provide new possibilities for global Indigenous diasporas to sustain themselves.

Access to Native media-produced content, representation, and ingenuity was limited to dispersed film festivals and tremendous support from organizations such as Sundance Institute and imagineNATIVE. The terrain has evolved and since gained momentous opportunity for Indigenously determined new media, video, and film to establish and sustain a presence in reputable exhibitions, new media based-platforms and screenings, and online expediency.

The transference of technologies has granted artists, as well as curators, an opportunity to explore and experiment with concepts related to ritual, time, performance, surveillance, and storytelling. In the

Right: Plate 193
1491s (Dallas Goldtooth, Sterlin Harjo, Migizi Pensoneau,
Ryan Red Corn, Bobby Wilson) *Smiling Indians*, 2011
YouTube video; 4:30 minutes (running time)

Collection of the 1491s
Image courtesy of Ryan Red Corn and Sterlin Harjo

Following pages: Plate 194
Daryl Lucero (Isleta Pueblo, birthdate unknown)
Material Culture, 2012
Video; 5:12 minutes (running time)

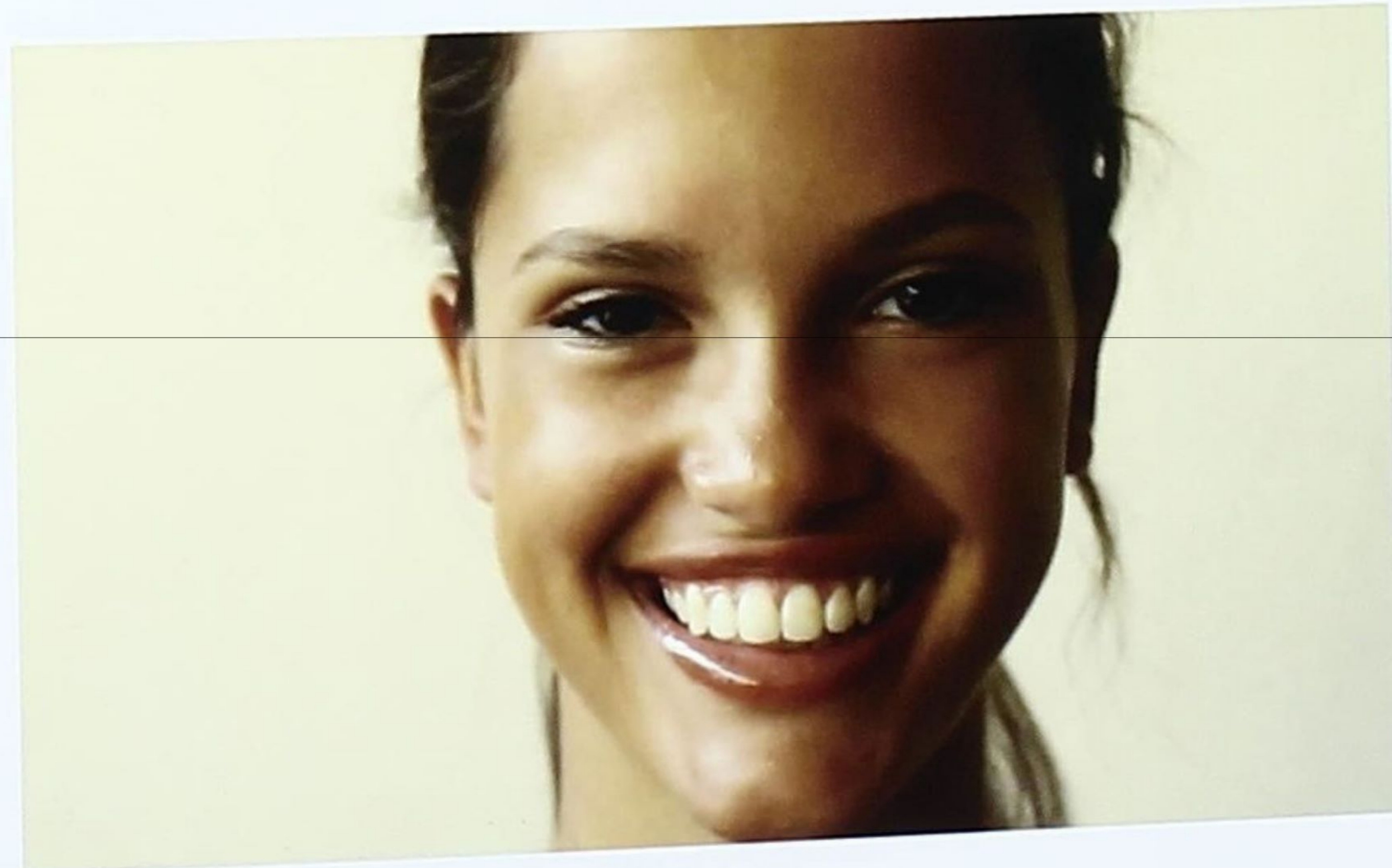
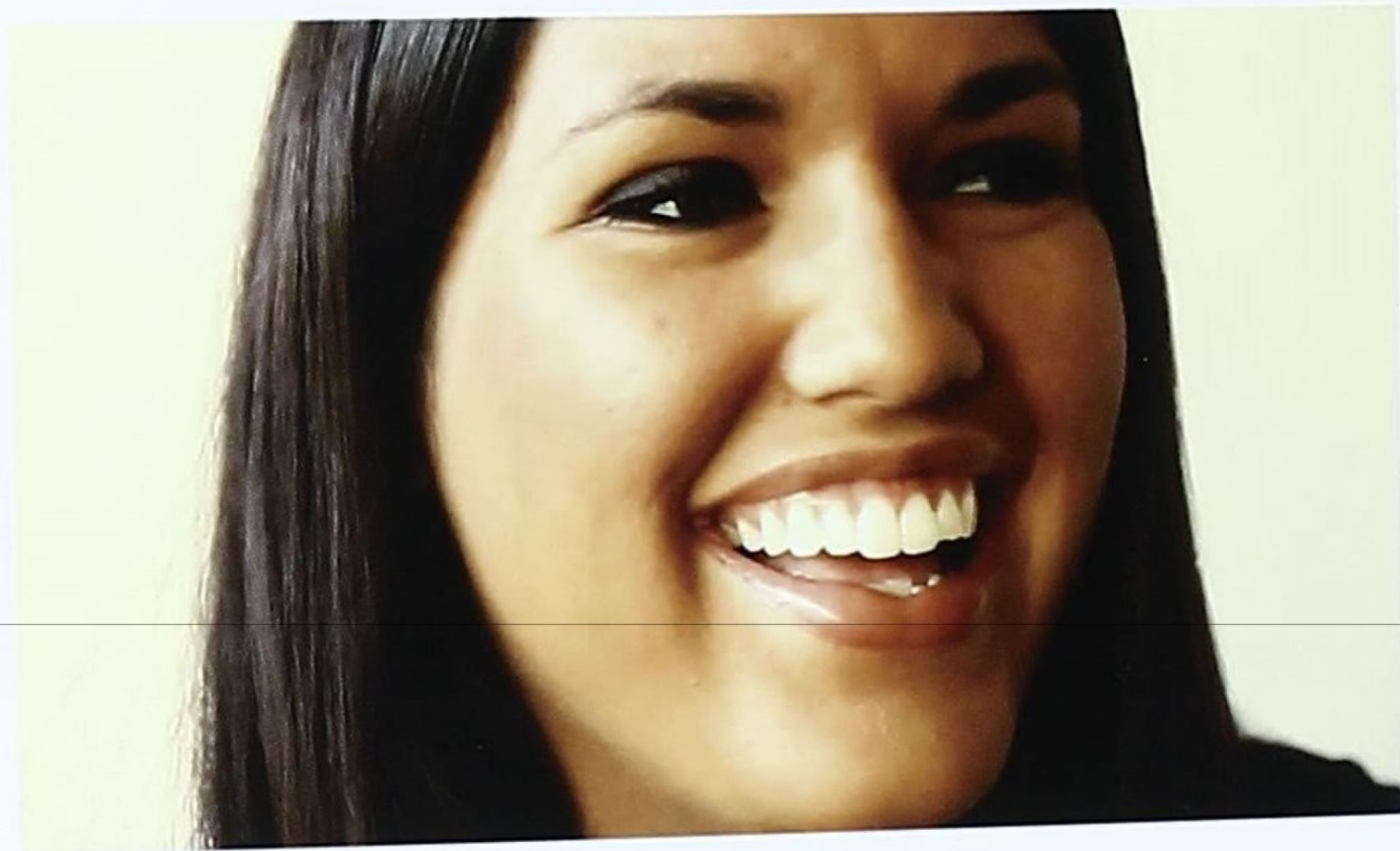
Collection of the artist
Images courtesy the artist

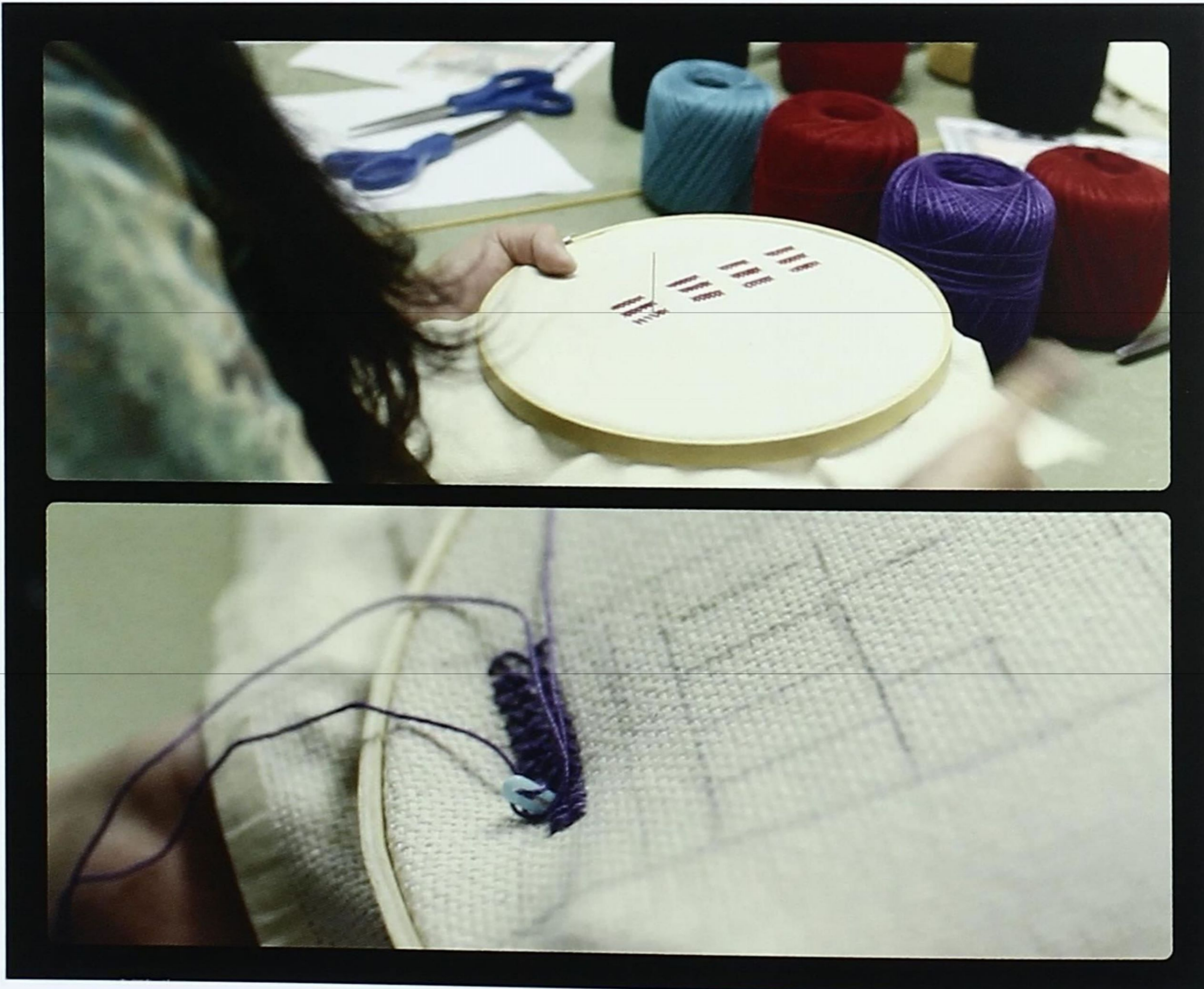
2006 exhibition *RED EYE: First Nations Short Film and Video*, an eclectic range of twenty-seven short film and video works by nineteen First Nations artists and emerging filmmakers including Shelley Niro (Quinte Bay Mohawk, b. 1954), Terrance Houle (Saulteaux, b. 1947), Kent Monkman (Cree, b. 1965), and Jason Lujan (Chiricahua Apache, b. 1971) was presented. The curatorial intention was to bring together works by Native artists who have peered through the lens derived from the medium of photography and clicked record or yelled "Action!" to control the images they anticipated. Regardless of whether the directors manipulated the principle genres of conventional film, each short film (under ten minutes) addressed personal, social, and political issues while breaking away from, and challenging, the cardboard depictions of Hollywood-style Indians that still appear in mainstream film and popular culture. Critic James Missen stated in a *FUSE* magazine review, "...each work retains its own formal and aesthetic sensibilities, operating to broaden and deepen the possibilities of what currently constitutes Aboriginal media art practice in a contemporary global context."⁴ *RED EYE* presented the consequences and circumstances of exhibiting the tactfulness of film and video as a critical tool for expression and manifestation of the oral tradition of storytelling that can blur boundaries of the limited expectations of contemporary Native art.

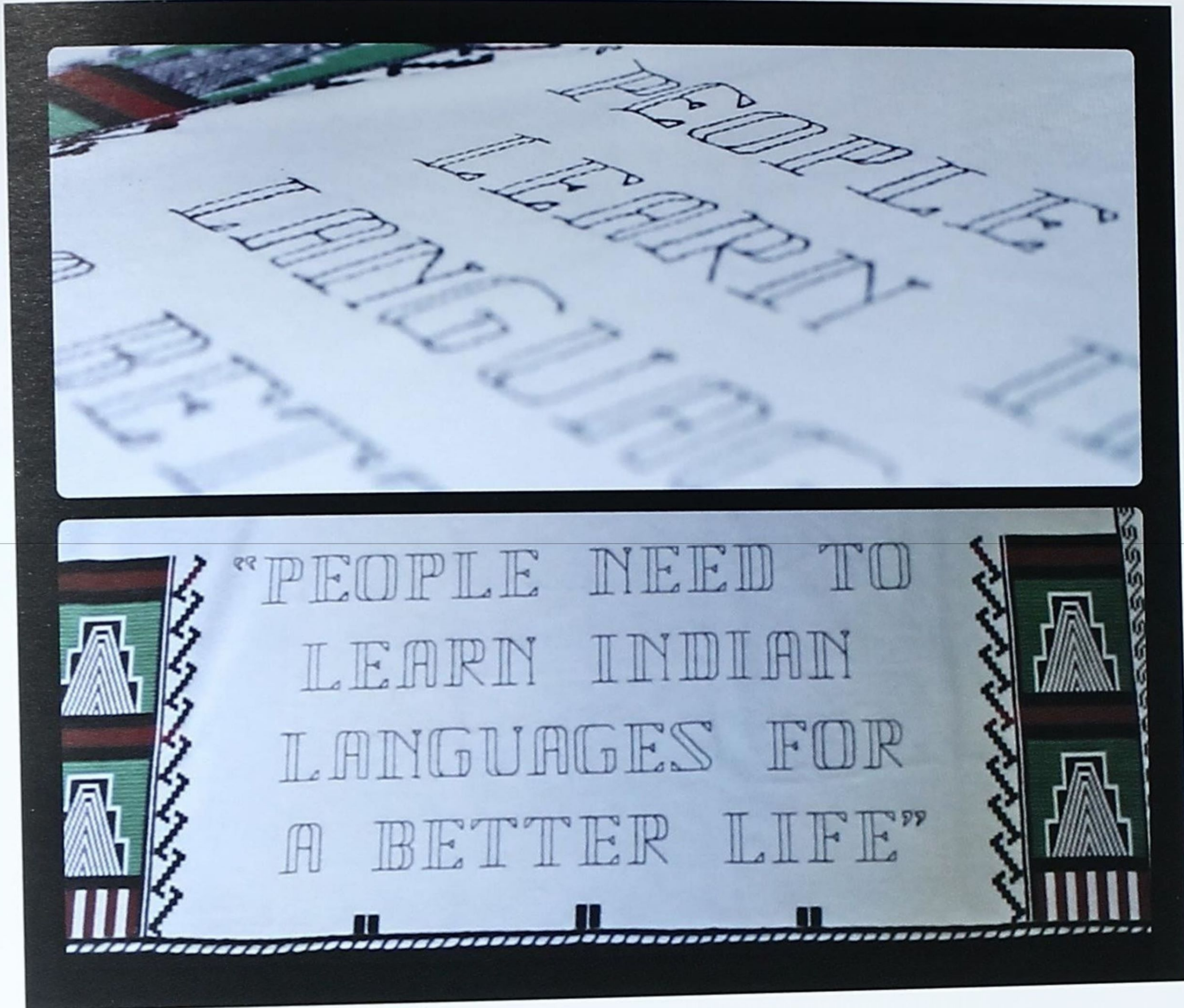
The 1491s, a collective of writers and filmmakers disguised as social/community activists, have seized the moment. Their DIY lo-fi video productions

inciting Native issues and posted on YouTube tackle misrepresentations of Native communities with a punch. The short videos reflect the irony of how we, as well as the mainstream, witness Native peoples (ourselves), tradition, and transition. By turning the tables on fixed perspectives created through centuries-old popular media and culture, the 1491s' response is timely and relevant. The widespread YouTube platform expands the reach of the 1491s beyond any fixed screening or video installation. Oklahoma-based founding member Ryan Red Corn (Osage, birth year unknown) explains, "Through digital media, we are able to permeate institutions, institutions where Native people do not have power. We do not have proper representation in textbooks. The Internet enables a certain amount of power."⁵

By choosing to empower, the 1491s' artful video *Smiling Indians*, 2011 (Plate 193), poetically counters the global retention of the Native image perpetuated by Edward S. Curtis' classic portraiture of the stoic and "vanishing" Indian. The 1491s shred and contradict those stagnant depictions through a modernist framework regarded by scholar/literary theorist Gerald Vizenor (White Earth Ojibwe, b. 1934) as "fugitive poses." Their media-based work addresses a greater socio-political sphere that declares agency for artists to address and interject an interactive relationship with their community and beyond. Through the spirit of social activism, their productions encourage community members to interact and improvise on both ends of the camera. In the series (REPRESENT),









the 1490s collaborate with Native youth to bring forward and shift focus to Indigenous diasporic strength. Their influential, humble, honest portrayal of Native people simultaneously reverses and comically challenges the rigid expectations derived from the victimization entrenched in colonization.

A broad palette inclusive of technologies renders continuity for artistic processes and labor and institutes interactivity among audiences. Traditional values, aesthetics, and philosophies expand the capacity for Indigenous artists to develop contemporary visual culture and languages relevant within a stratum of local and global identity that can endure and mobilize presence.

Emerging artist Daryl Lucero (Isleta Pueblo, birth year unknown) combined traditional Isleta Pueblo textile and embroidery practices for his mixed media installation *Material Culture*, 2012 (Plate 194), as a community action to acknowledge and reflect upon an Isleta worldview and their defined visual culture. In an evolving contemporary economy and through the adaptation of material, cotton monk's cloth has become the fabric identified as "traditional" and inherent among

his community. The material is embroidered meticulously with distinctive geometric patterns that define an Isleta aesthetic. The fabric holds significant historic and political currency. Lucero explains, "The precious material gave me visionary attachment and relationship to my community, place, consciousness and being."⁶

For Lucero, the woven and embroidered textiles, as well as the creative process, contribute immensely in shaping strong community connections. For *Material Culture*, he collaborated with Isleta elementary school students and elder/senior artists, creating a unique relationship through which multiple and generational perspectives merge. The children expressed their relationship to their community on their own terms by drawing and embroidering personal reflections with the guidance of the elders, who would transfer, amalgamate, and embroider the collective knowledge strewn onto a sixteen-foot-long surface. Images of Isleta landscapes, patterns and designs, a killer whale, and SpongeBob SquarePants reveal the traditional and contemporary experiences that identify a current Isleta visual language that can shift constantly.

Material Culture's subtle yet lofty grandeur

Plate 195

Barry Ace (Anishinaabe, b. 1958)

Wassechgan (Window), 1999

Interactive installation for the exhibit *Emergence from the Shadows: First Peoples Photographic Perspectives*, Canadian Museum of History; dimensions vary

Collection of the artist

Image courtesy the artist

(it measures eight feet hung across the gallery ceiling, with the remaining eight feet draped down the gallery wall) was also the surface for a video projection documenting the communal action. Lucero collaborated with filmmaker Dylan McClaughlin on a strategy to extend the fabric's capacity to reflect the layers of Isleta narratives and communication. Lucero's inclusion of the documentary process is a progressive shift, given the community's persistence in safeguarding their culture and tradition. Embroidery on the bottom of the textile completes *Material Culture*, reading, "People Need To Learn Indian Languages For A Better Life." Offered as both cultural evidence and a philosophical declaration for Indigenous survivance, the weighty affirmation sewn into our being extends our communal/national responsibility.

Multi-disciplinary artists Jolene Rickard (Tuscarora, b. 1956) and Barry Ace (Odawa, b. 1958) incorporated technology as a vital and experimental component to advance electronic multi-media in the late 1990s and connect and access personal and communal knowledge through an interactive experience in their respective installations, *Corn Blue Room* (Plate

134, page 209) and *Wassechgan* (Plate 195).

Rickard's *Corn Blue Room*, 1998, was one of seven installations produced for the exhibition *Reservation X* that opened at the Canadian Museum of Civilization in 1998. The exhibition interrogated notions of Indigenous identity in relationship to place (home, community, and nation) through a contemporary art installation-based lens. *Corn Blue Room* was contrived to emulate the physical structure and metaphoric concept of the Haudenosaunee longhouse, representative of the extensive geo-political space the six Iroquois nations occupy. Rickard constructs the longhouse's oblong architectural structure with steel fabricated stands bearing photographs of traditional white corn and hydroelectric power lines from the Niagara Moses Power Project. Central to Rickard's longhouse, six braided strands of white corn hang from the theoretical rafters above a floor flooded in a blue luminance.

The substantial presence of corn as the pillars of the reconfigured longhouse resonates with Iroquoian philosophies of power that sustain and nurture us all. Power is shifted on the interior of one half

Plate 196
Melanie Printup Hope (Tuscarora, b. 1960)
Prayer of Thanksgiving, 1997
Film; 1 minute (running time)

Collection of the artist
Image courtesy of the artist

of the longhouse structure and represented through the glaring encroachment of colonial economies upon the local eco-systems.

Inside the longhouse, Rickard integrated early interactive touch screen technology that was also projected upon the installation's wall. Images displayed on the central screen became the gateway to the room's didactic, nonlinear visual narrative of the Tuscarora Nation's interconnectedness, empowerment, and resistance with natural resources and the New York Power Authority. By maneuvering across six different icons—a raised beadwork butterfly, a sunflower, an eagle feather, an electronic tower, the New York State Police, and a kitsch Plains Indian figurine—a visualized stratum of information leads viewers through specific incidents in relationship to the 1958 intrusion upon Tuscarora lands by colonial authority and corporate force. The embedded mapping of images on the CD-ROM uncovers an autonomous worldview we carry forward and charts the vigorous efforts to remain sovereign. Rickard toys with the application of technology in relationship to conflicting measures of harvesting power. She states,

The use of media simultaneously embodies the "energy" of electricity while "being" electric. By touching the screen we become part of that energy and also are electric. How we touch or interact with electric or energy is mediated by how we think, or in the rhetoric of our culture, the "power of the good mind."⁷

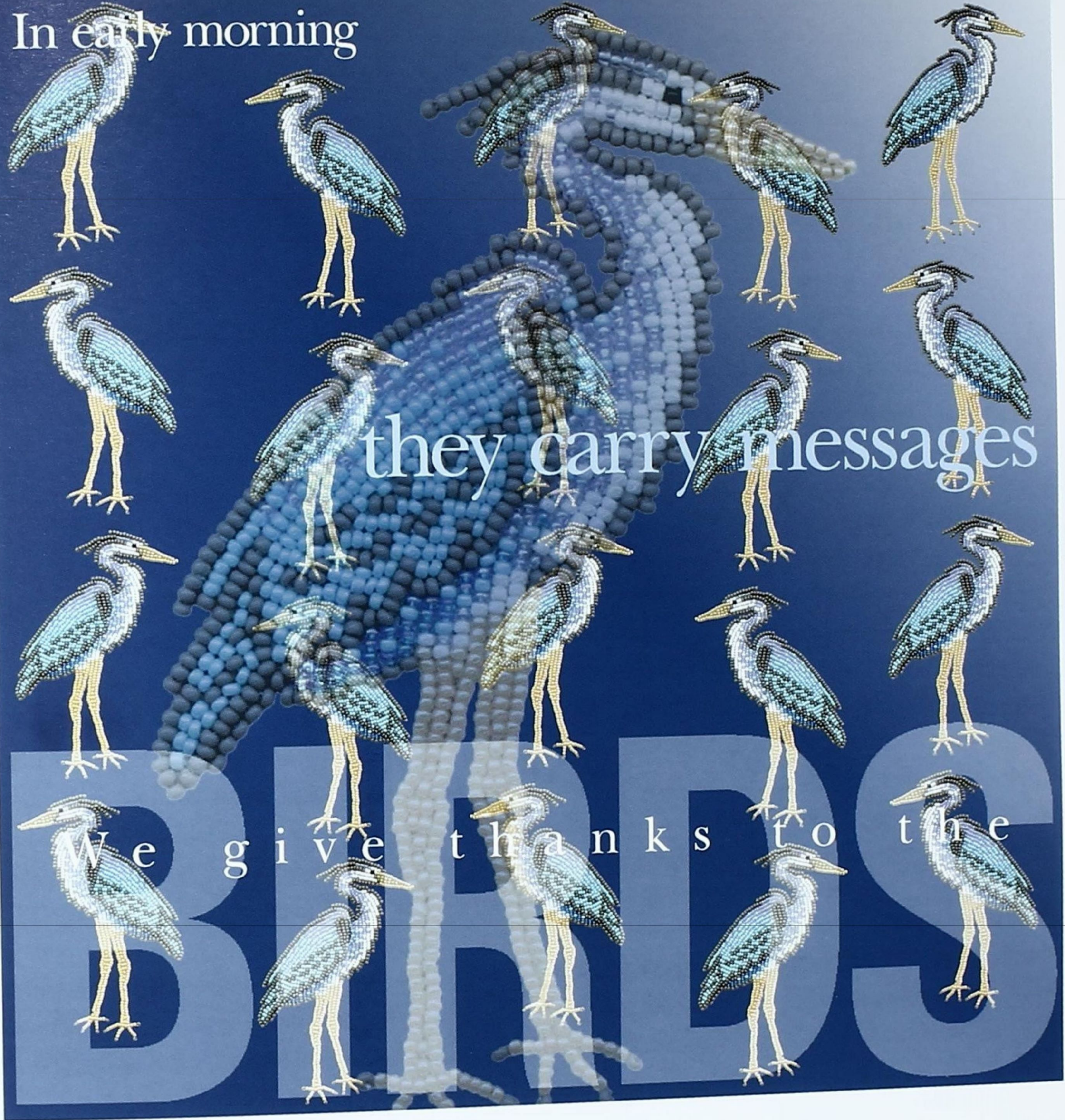
The integration of then-current technologies suited Rickard's intent to position and interactively correlate real and metaphoric notions of power, resistance,

and determination.

Using a similar media platform, Barry Ace's momentous installation *Wassechgan*, 1999, the Ojibwa word for "window," interacts with a void of elapsed time and the retention of personal, communal, and historical archives. He strategically positions seven cherished intimate momentums and family photographs in the museum gallery space as signifiers that trigger personal memory for a public narrative. A fabricated brushed steel display case and wall and seven steel poles that build the frame of a lodge counter generic anthropological museum pageantry and practices of ethnographic display in relationship to Native cultures. A wire sculpture shaped in the form of the Anishnaabe trickster figure Nanabush is placed on a stage presiding over the installation. Scanned images of the objects from the display case are projected on the wall behind him. Nanabush is the keeper of knowledge, an authoritative figure and storyteller who shares the truth to be witnessed. A touch screen computer installed to the right of Nanabush is the portal to retrieve Ace's virtual testimonials that "reveal the 'significance of the insignificant' by providing an honouring space and testimonial to the lives that once were."⁸

As the accessibility to new media increased and gradually became more user-friendly, experimentation and development with software programs and the Internet developed in the late 1990s. Two pinnacle undertakings include Melanie Printup Hope's (Tuscarora, b. 1960) *Prayer of Thanksgiving*, 1997 (Plate 196), and First Nations collective Nation to Nation's ambitious online project Cyberpowwow, spearheaded by Skawenati Tricia Fragnito (Kahnawake Mohawk, b. 1969). Printup Hope, who received a master of fine arts degree in electronic arts at the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute,

In early morning



they carry messages

We give thanks to the

BIRDS

Plate 197
Skawennati (Mohawk, b. 1969)
TimeTraveller™ Dakotas Raise Weapons, 2010
Inkjet on poly banner; 36 x 60 inches

Collection of the Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians
and Western Art

was supported by agencies such as the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts to develop the cross-disciplinary aspect of *Prayer of Thanksgiving*. The work incorporates the process of traditional beadwork practices that are scanned and manipulated digitally. Printup Hope considers this process a form of weaving together technologies: she designed and hand-beaded a visual language to accompany the Haudenosaunee prayer that acts as a testament to gratitude to the natural world. It also instructs the people of our rightful place in creation. The beautifully rendered designs are transformed for the web as a point and click interactive site. Each page emphasizes particular aspects of the natural elements, from the lowest form on Earth to the skies above. Audio files of the Tuscarora language accompany each section to support and extend the impact of the initial orality of the prayer. Printup Hope's site extends the reach of the Creator's instructions and carries forward the values a global society must consider and abide by.

A sovereign intent to claiming territory guided Skawennati Tricia Fragnito to formulate a concept of establishing an Indigenous post-colonial presence in cyberspace. Imagining the World Wide Web as a new territory, Fragnito built a new nation disguised as "an Aboriginally determined Territory in Cyberspace" from 1996 through 2004.⁹ Cyberpowwow was

cross-disciplinary and combined interactivity in real time as a physical and virtual community event. Developed across three incarnations—Cyberpowwow, Cyberpowwow 2, and CPW 2K: Cyberpowwow Goes Global—the website and events sought to shape the Internet to be inclusive of our cultures, build a virtual community, and nurture continuity in relationship to our adaptation of technologies. Cyberpowwow brought a community of artists and writers together in one space to access art and criticism that crossed a digital divide. In a pre-Facebook era, Cyberpowwow was also a communication device to engage a public locally and globally.

Cyberpowwow expanded the boundaries of presence and made Fragnito instrumental in moving new media practice and theory further. She states:

I came to realize that it was vital that Native people participate in the shaping of Cyberspace, so that we could determine our own image there. Prior new technologies had shaped the way non-Natives saw us—the camera taught people that we all wore headdresses; movies showed us as mute, or monosyllabic at best. But today, many of



us Native types have been able to get our hands on a computer at the same time/rate as the rest of the population. We use it to tell our own stories, create our own images, and to have an effect on how the whole thing looks and works and acts.¹⁰

The existing capacity to tell her own stories is transferred further in her series “TimetravellerTM,” 2007–2013, a multi-platform interactive moving images project inspired by gaming virtual technology known as machinima. As a means to explore historical fictions and engage with a violent colonial past such as the Alcatraz occupation and the Oka Crisis, Fragnito reimagines critical events of Native America through an avatar who time travels. Analogous to an episodic film, “TimetravellerTM” (Plate 197) is directed and shot in Second Life, an online virtual world and program. Fragnito has been successful in interchangeably exhibiting “TimeTravellerTM” virtually and in the physical space of a gallery and/or museum.¹¹

Configured gallery space and location were essential components to the collective Postcommodity’s sound installation *If History Moves at the Speed of Its Weapons, Then the Shape of the Arrow Is Changing*,

2010 (Plate 198), at the Museum of Contemporary Native Arts (MoCNA). Developed as a metaphorical sonic audio assault, the 3D sound sculpture responded to the 400th anniversary of the City of Santa Fe and the 1680 Pueblo Revolt. As settler society celebrated anniversaries of conquest, Postcommodity was invited to reconsider the narratives of exploration, conquest, occupation, and invasion that are absent from the rich history and cultural geography of the land and original peoples. The collective transformed the gallery space into a Trojan horse of sorts, painting the entire gallery in gold to recall the intrinsic Spaniard’s myth that led them to search the Southwest for cities of gold. Eight gold-painted audio speakers were situated around the perimeter of the gallery, blasting out sound compositions derived from weapons such as bows and arrow, slingshots, and war clubs from the Pueblo Revolt era. Postcommodity explains:

We have performed a ballistic analysis for each weapon that includes all potential impact points within the gallery, providing a comprehensive mathematical analysis of multiple ambush scenarios. From this data algorithms were derived to inform sound compositions specific to each



weapon. The result is a dynamic and interactive installation entirely informed by the inherent physical, cultural and intermediary properties of each weapon. The sound filling the room becomes the medium for the weapons themselves to physically engage and envelop audiences.¹²

The inherent soundscape, developed through digital audio engineering for the installation, collapsed time to recall memories of violent times and acts inherent of conquest. Cultural theorist Paul Virilio, who argued that military technologies drive societal change, inspired Postcommodity to develop such sounds electronically to create the anxiety inherent to war.

The shift to access technology has led many artists' practices and processes to be versatile and expands their oeuvre beyond a specific fine arts tradition. New media art practices, broad in scope, have become integral to a specified process, inserting an alternative category that demands consideration. This important transition complicates and challenges curatorial practice and the capacity for artists, curators, and institutions to reconsider time and space in relationship to exhibitions and audience. As new agencies for production evolve, Native artists will adapt their creative labor to develop

a unique sensibility that draws upon the Haudenosaunee concept of "extending the rafters" to build capacity in all the complex, timeless imaginative spaces that we manifest.

Plate 198

Postcommodity (Raven Chacon, Cristóbal Martínez, Kade Twist, and Nathan Young), *If History Moves At the Speed of Its Weapons, Then the Shape of the Arrow Is Changing*, 2010
3D sound sculpture (9 audio channels, loudspeakers, gold acrylic paint) image composite, installation view, Museum of Contemporary Native Arts, Santa Fe, New Mexico

Courtesy of Postcommodity and Bockley Gallery

¹“Atanarjuat and Other Inuit Videos Featured at *Documenta 11*,” Insuma News, June 3, 2002, <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/NatNews-north/message/3003>.

² Heather Igloliorte, “Arctic Culture/Global Indigeneity,” in ed. Lynda Jessup, *Negotiations in a Vacant Lot: Studying the Visual in Canada* (Kingston: Queen’s University Press, 2012), 150–170.

³ Karen Raney, interview with Okwui Enwezor, “To-ing and Fro-ing,” *Art in Question* (New York and London: Continuum Press, 2003), 5. http://www.engage.org/readmore/..%5Cdownloads%5C152E254EE_13.%20To-ing%20and%20Fro-ing.pdf.

⁴ James Missen, “Asserting the Right to Sovereignty, Audio-Visually—*RED EYE* First Nations Short Film and Video,” *FUSE Magazine* 31, no. 1 (Winter 2008): 46–49.

⁵ Anya Montiel, “The 1491s Occupy the Web,” *American Indian, Smithsonian Institution* (Spring 2012): 39–41.

⁶ Artist’s statement, April 2012. Artist’s correspondence with the author, April 2012.

⁷ Jolene Rickard, personal communication, July 2012.

⁸ Artist’s statement 1999. Artist correspondence with the author, 1999.

⁹ Candice Hopkins, (kawennati (Mohawk)), “A Wrinkle in Time: On Indians and the Future,” *We Are Here, The Eiteljorg Contemporary Art Fellowship 2011* (Indianapolis: Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art, 2011), 47–57.

¹⁰ Sharita Towne, “Skawennati—Mohawk,” *Contemporary North American Indigenous Arts* (blog), Winter 2012, <http://contemporarynativeartists.tumblr.com/post/19142160162/skawennati-mohawk>.

¹¹ Episodes of “Timetraveller TM” have been exhibited at the Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art and Museum of Art and Design and was included in the exhibition *Close Encounters: The Next 500 Years* in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

¹² Artists’ statement, August 2010. Artist’s correspondence with the author, August 2010.